

# THE FORD STORE

(From the Aug. 28, 1920 issue of the Boston Evening Transcript.)

**The History of This Early Commercial Establishment in the Second Settlement of the Pilgrim Forefathers Bring to Light the Romance and Human Nature of Other Days**

By Robert Gregory Gifford

"Give us a lift on this, Mr. Webster."

"Certainly," responded Daniel Webster, and the statesman walked to the storekeeper's side.

"Now all together!"

Thus the 2 men juggled a large box of Havana sugar in Ford's store on "ye old maine highway" between Duxbury and Plymouth. The illustrious Mr. Webster lived about 2 miles to the north and did his trading here, not without difficulty if tradition speaks truly. For it is a matter of local history that the orator found it necessary upon one occasion to exercise his arts and fluency upon the grocer's clerk, when the latter attempted to extort 10 cents for a dozen eggs.

The scene of this little encounter is reputed to be the oldest department store in America where, for the first time, cheese and needles, hardware and perfumes were handled with equal nonchalance. How naturally and innocently the idea of a general store sprang from community life! The townspeople in Duxbury, the second settlement of the Pilgrim forefathers, regarded the necessities of life, and from this simple idea was developed that highly specialized, thoroughly articulate and dangerous organism, the modern department store. But how far a cry this now accepted monster seems from the little Duxbury emporium where men came together to exchange various commodities and those other characteristically New England products - ideas.

## Typical New England Group

Duxbury is one of the most perfect of the beautiful little towns up and down the length of the New England coast and by happy chance the old store is located in the choicest and most picturesque spot. To seek it from the centre of the town one should follow no other route than the ancient Pilgrim path John Alden and Myles Standish trod to and fro between the homesteads. Later these selfsame footsteps developed into "ye maine highway" and now they have attained the so-called dignity of the State road. Beyond the crest of the hill one drops on the old store quite unexpectedly, partially hidden behind a lilac hedge. Here it stands today at a quaint angle cozily snuggled behind protecting hills as if entrenched from the attacks of the aborigines and savage marauders to say nothing of the hordes of tourists which will swarm here during the tercentenary at Plymouth.

Of the group of 6 buildings, the largest is the oldest. Its characteristic New England simplicity and austerity make it completely satisfying. To this nucleus other 4 buildings were added from time to time, as business increased. A charming group they make all uniting in pleasing homogeneity, fortunately having escaped remodelling during the vicissitudes of the old store's waning glory. Strangely enough the building faces the northeast and is hence open to the most savage of the New England gales. These weatherwise old-timers naturally knew this was not the quarter

where the elements were most kindly towards them, and consequently never faced their buildings in that direction, be there a road or no road. Why Eloegeer Howland, the builder of the first store on that site, chose to place his building at that angle and on that high open spot is purely a matter of conjecture. Surely the utilitarian demands were all-prevading in people's minds at that time, and had the aesthetic desires threatened to possess old Howland in those rigorous days, they would have been straightway suppressed. Had he appreciated beauty, however, it might lead us to some solution of this architectural mystery, for we might surmise that he could easily set aside his "Old Medford" and get a superior stimulus from drinking in the marvellous bit of scenery that lay before his very door.

#### Beauty of the Surroundings

Any "Romany Rye" romancer would be fully justified in lingering over this delectable bit of landscape. Keats and Corotlike it is in its romanticism. From the edge of the road which passes the store, rolling green pasture lands, dotted with grazing cattle, rise and fall gently into the fertile meadows. Bordered and garnished these lowlands teem with trees and undergrowth of every description. Here and there by happy chance a picturesque farmhouse is deftly placed. Nature, the master artisan, easily achieves the most emphatic stroke of all in "Mill brook." Tumbling down the valley it goes under a little footbridge, through an aspen thicker, whence it wends its charming course across the marshes until it finally merges with the salt creek from the sea. In the old days this waterway was used for bringing goods as near as possible to the Fords' store. Now it saunters along untrammelled and winds in graceful scrolls across the noble expansive marshes that

#### Stretch leisurely off in a pleasant plain

##### To the terminal blue of the main.

To be on this spot on a hot July morning when the wind pulls around and drifts from the east is a rare delight. Direct from the ocean it comes, wholly clarified and pure; down it dips to absorb the poignant freshness of the flats and the odor of the marsh rosemary. Onward it floats to pick up the fragrance of the waving marsh grass, not forgetting the pungent smell from yonder pine grove, until at last it is about filling our lungs with its strange power.

From the hitching-post at Ford's store the largest hill to the northeast is Duck Hill, where I had a singular adventure. After having hunted every nook and corner of the surrounding country in search of some of the "old timers" who could remember the glories of other days, I chanced upon Tom Weston. What a patriarch he appeared as he stood tossing his hay on the uplands much as he had done for "precious nigh 80 years past."

"Shore," says he, "I calc'late 'twas the busiest place in the country. Folks a-comin' and goin' from Tinkertown to Tarkiln. Used to git me corn ground at Seth Southworth's mill down thar below and trade it off at Nat Ford's." Suddenly he raised his husky, cracking, but still strong voice, and ended menacingly.

"I swan I've killed 8 men up thar."

Somewhat astonished, I withdrew a step.

"You've killed 8 men!" I repeated.

"Yas," he chuckled, "I've done enough work around thar to kill 8 men."

Upon receiving this droll retort my wonderment gave way to many searching questions, which

he answered to the best of his still good memory.

This store was established in 1826 under the name of James T. Ford & Co., the firm including James Turner Ford, Nathaniel Ford and Peleg Ford, 3 brothers. About 1843 Nathaniel and his 2 sons took over the business and they were the active proprietors through the heyday of its power. In conjunction with the Duxbury establishment this enterprising family ran a hat store on Ann St., Boston.

This general store of the Fords' was well known far and wide all over the country and did a large and flourishing business. In the palmiest days during the forties and fifties its trade amounted to \$200,000 a year.